

'love one another ... it's as simple and as difficult as that'. Leunig.

a sermon preached on the
twentieth sunday after pentecost

26 October 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by mother emily fraser

the lections: Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13; Matthew 22:34-46

Just as in last week's Gospel reading, groups have gathered around Jesus to hear him speak and to ask him questions. In today's Gospel, Jesus is asked to name the greatest and first commandment, and he responds with the words of Deuteronomy, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind", and continues, saying "you shall love your neighbour as yourself". He reminds his listeners, and us, that "on these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets". These are words from the core of the Jewish tradition. They would have rung in the ears of his listeners as key tenets of faith and the basis of good conduct and morality. Jesus used familiar words and well-known prayers to begin his discussion with those who had gathered to see him.

In saying that all the laws and the prophets hang from the command to love, Jesus reminds us that everything grows from that command to love. Love is the central trunk from which the branches of our actions and behaviours grow.

So Jesus' words offer two things for us today, a reminder of how central faith is in our existence, and an insight into just what exactly lies at the core of our own faith.

Jesus speaks of our faith in all-encompassing terms. Our faith reaches every part of us - our hearts, our souls and our minds - all that we are, and using all that we are - bodies, minds and souls - we are to love God and love one another. Loving God is our response to the love we have been freely offered by God, we are in a relationship of love with God, not one of appeasement or subjection. All our prayers to and worship of God are not intended as a form of divine placation or to earn reward or benefits for good conduct, they are our loving response to God.

Our faith is something which is said to guide everything we do. It determines how we respond in all circumstances, and is a guide to how we ought to act in the world. I've often thought that if someone were to demand an answer as to the practical value of my faith, I'd respond that it is my guide to how I live and move in the world and tells me how I can do this without harming others, but teaches me to offer them love and compassion and empathy.

With his words, Jesus reminds us that the core of our faith is to love. From a call to love one another, and to love God, comes the subsequent call act out that love as a sign of our faith; calls to be generous with what we have, to be hospitable to others, to be charitable and support those in need, to welcome the outcast and the stranger. All these core aspects of our faith stem from that central core of love and are displays of love. All we do is to be shaped by the love we have for others. This is a particularly poignant reminder when faith has been used to justify exclusion, discrimination, segregation, hatred and deadly violence. Faith - and its insistent call to love - is something which calls us into unity, rather than division, and we need to act to reclaim faith as a source of love.

As Christians, we are called to be people known for and known by our acts of love. We affirm in song that 'where there is charity and love, God is there'. Think of how many hymns and anthems refer to God as loving and calling us to love. This message has been sung, spoken and prayed throughout all of history.

And in that continuity of a message of love is a thorn. We still need to hear that message because we haven't quite fully understood it.

However hopeful all this talk of love may be, something else needs to be acknowledged – to love is the core of our faith, but it's also one of the hardest things we are called to do. Loving others is neither simple nor risk-free, and requires hard work and effort, rather than being something easy. Michael Leunig summarised it well – Love one another and you will be happy – it's as simple and as difficult as that.

It is a challenge to be as open as Christ calls us to be, to welcome those who are ostracised by society and on its fringes, to be willing to welcome and befriend those who are left behind and considered beyond our compassion. It's easy to love the lovely, but so hard to love the unlovely. That's the Christian challenge in the call to love.

We risk being marginalised ourselves, but living out the Gospel requires us to have that courage. Jesus said 'take up your cross' and that means to live by his example and love by his example, despite the difficulty that poses.

But, despite the difficulty of the call to love others, we have as our companion on this journey Jesus, who lived his life according to love, embodied love and let it shape his entire ministry. We have Jesus as our guide and companion, to whom we can look for inspiration along the way.

My prayer for us all is that we may use this week to express our faith through consideration of others, and extravagant acts of love, compassion and hospitality which reveal our Christian calling, however challenging we may find this.

curate.emily@stjohnscamberwell.org.au